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**HUMAN RESOURCE DEVOLUTION:
A LOCAL AUTHORITY PERSPECTIVE**

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE
DEGREE OF
MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

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Abstract

This dissertation asks the question “What are the barriers to the successful devolving of Human Resource Management to First Line Managers?” and the dissertation makes an attempt to connect what is already known within existing contemporary research about devolved Human Resource Management and the barriers to it being successful, and what First Line Managers within Liverpool City Council find in reality. A conceptual model is formulated which identifies the main concepts that influence the Human Resource role of the Line Manager. The Human Resource role that First Line Managers undertake is explored through the use of a case study within the Environment Business Group of Liverpool City Council using multiple qualitative methods. The findings of the case study support the validity of the key aspects identified as being barriers to the successful Human Resource devolvement to First Line Managers i.e. communication, skills/training and staff management. The dissertation therefore proposes how these key aspects need to be addressed to improve Human Resource Management within Liverpool City Council to enhance the Human Resource function, First Line Manager and staff performance.

Declaration

This work is original and has not been submitted previously for any academic purpose.

All secondary sources are acknowledged.

Signed:

Date:

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

This dissertation will look at the barriers preventing the successful devolving of Human Resource Management (HRM) to First Line Managers (FLMs) within the Environment Business Group (EBG) of Liverpool City Council (LCC). The rationale behind the choice of FLMs is that they tend to have the most employees directly accountable to them on a day-to-day operational basis and therefore it is likely that any devolvement of HRM will have the most significant impact on FLMs.

Therefore the purpose of this dissertation is to review the contemporary theory of HRM devolvement to Line Managers and to compare this theory with what has happened in LCC since the move by LCC towards devolving Human Resource (HR) responsibilities to the line. Most importantly the dissertation will look at the barriers that have prevented the HR role being successfully devolved to line managers, what conclusions can be made, and to examine if any recommendations can be put forward to improve how HR is managed within LCC.

1.2 Research question

The problem that this research is attempting to address is the identification of the barriers that are preventing successful devolvement of HR to FLMs within a specific business group of LCC. The research consists of a case study of up to 20 FLMs from the four business units within the EBG of LCC.

The research undertaken will be conducted via focus groups where participants will be interviewed collectively using a series of open ended questions that will provide an opportunity to probe participant's answers, and to encourage the participants to elaborate or build on a relevant points as well as commenting on points of relevance not previously considered.

The research aims are as follows:

- i. To understand contemporary thinking on devolvment of HRM to Line Managers
- ii. To obtain an insight into First line managers perceptions of HR within LCC
- iii. To gain an understanding of what the barriers are that prevent successful HRM devolvment to FLMs in the Environment Business Group of LCC
- iv. To get an understanding of the HR function within LCC from the perspective of a senior HR manager
- v. To make conclusions on what the impact of devolved HR has had on FLMs in LCC

1.3 Justification for the research

The justification for the research is based upon strategic HRM theory, the devolvment of HRM to line Managers and the current HR practice within LCC. From a theoretical perspective there is a plethora of literature relating to devolving HR to line management (Garavan, Costine and Heraty 1995, Renwick 2002, Harris, Doughty and Kirk 2002) including its successes and its failures (Thornhill and Saunders 1998, Suff 2006,) but there are three aspects in particular that the researcher would suggest from personal experience that require further exploration and understanding. Equally the researcher considers that these three aspects are pivotal to the successful implementation of devolved HRM to the line in any organisation namely:

- i. Communication (Wright, McMahan, Snell and Gerhart 2001, Paauwe and Boselie 2003)
- ii. Skills/Training (Priestland and Hanig 2005, Milsome 2006, Rankin 2006)
- iii. Staff Management (Whitmore 2002, Purcell and Hutchinson 2007)

Furthermore, only academics and/or HR practitioners have almost exclusively undertaken previous research into the devolvment of HRM to FLM's. This dissertation is being undertaken by an FLM whom it is proposed has a different insight and therefore a potentially a viewpoint into devolved HR issues not previously explained.

In summary the research is justified because it will assist LCC as an organisation to understand what the barriers are that are currently hindering FLMs in being able to execute their HRM role fully such that improvements can be suggested that may improve FLM performance in HRM. Therefore the points raised and aspects identified

with regards to the implementation of HRM and its associated devolvment to Line Managers provides a sound basis for the justification of this dissertation.

1.4 Methodology

The philosophical perspective will be a mixture of Critical Realism utilising an objective ontology based on existing researcher knowledge through contemporary thinking on devolvment of HRM, and an interpretative and subjective ontology from the applied research.

The research strategy will initially review academic literature, reference books and journal articles, from various sources including University libraries and the Internet to understand contemporary thinking on HRM devolvment to Line Managers. It will also provide the concepts that will formulate the conceptual framework. Subsequently a multi method qualitative study of semi structured interviewing of FLMs in focus groups and a one to one interview with a senior manager in HR will be undertaken. The focus groups and one to one interview will explore the LCC current approach to HRM, they will help the researcher to understand the FLM and HR manager perspective of the devolved HR role, and they will enable the barriers preventing successful implementation to be understood.

The literature review and the results from the focus groups and the HR manager interview will provide an answer to the research question, satisfy the aims of the research, allow conclusions to be made and if appropriate offer recommendations.

1.5 Outline of the Chapters

Following on from Chapter 1, the dissertation will be undertaken as following:

Chapter 2 provides a literature review that will be undertaken to provide the theoretical evidence to support the applied research that the researcher will be undertaking as detailed in chapter 3. The literature review will include a brief review of contemporary strategic HRM and the associated devolvment of HRM to Line Managers. Furthermore it will explain the reality of what devolvment has meant to the Line Managers from a review of the various case studies, highlighting the barriers that have prevented thus far HR devolvment being a success. The literature review most importantly will assist in formulating a conceptual model. The concepts, ideas and theories of the conceptual

model will be used to provide the basis for the questions to be used in the focus groups such that the three identified key aspects can be examined in more detail.

Chapter 3 contains the research methodology to be employed to collect the data to answer the research question. Initially the research philosophy and principles will be explained and the methods considered appropriate for the research question to be answered will be defined. The justification for the strategy and research methods used or discounted will also be explained. A description of the methods chosen will include the instruments or procedures used to collect and interpret the resulting data. Limitations of the research methods chosen and any ethical considerations will also be included.

Chapter 4 will present the findings of the applied research in relation to the semi structured interviews and the more prescriptive interview with a manager within the HR function. The results will provide evidence on how FLMs view their role in implementing HR and relating this evidence back to what should be from the theory, in particular the conceptual model that has been formulated in chapter 2.

Chapter 5 will review and interpret the findings of chapter 4 and relate these to the original aims of the research and in context to the theory outlined from the literature review in chapter 2. This will enable conclusions to be made.

Chapter 6 provides recommendations for an improved implementation of HR by FLMs in LCC that will be presented for consideration to senior managers within LCC.

1.6 Definitions

First Line Managers (FLMs) for the purpose of this dissertation refers solely to those managers in an operational team leader or supervisory role, except for one instance where noted within the dissertation.

1.7 Summary

Chapter 1 has given the reader an introduction to the research and its aims, provided a justification on both theoretical and practical grounds and provided a summary of how the research will be undertaken and its findings presented. The following chapters will describe the research and its findings in full detail.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The first question that needs answering is what is actually meant by Human Resource Management (HRM)? HRM can simply be described as anything and everything associated with the management of employee relations within an organisation (Boxall & Purcell 2000).

HRM as a concept started to receive attention by academics in the 1980's (Beer et al., 1984), firstly in the US and then on a wider scale including the U.K. It can be defined as the strategic and coherent approach to the management of an organization's most valued assets i.e. the people working in the organisation who individually and collectively contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the business (Armstrong 2006). It can also be easily distinguished from Personnel Management in so much that HRM has at its core increased responsibilities for employee management and development by non personnel staff i.e. managers at all levels, whilst leaving the traditional personnel function to take on a more strategic HR role aligned to organisational corporate aims and objectives.

There is also a commonly held view that employees are an organisation's most valuable assets and their effective deployment and development will improve organisational performance (Guest 2002a), and it follows that HRM emphasises the importance of the employees as a valuable asset in achieving sustainable competitive advantage, that HR practices need to be integrated with the corporate strategy, and that HR specialists help organisational controllers to meet both efficiency and equity objectives, Bratton & Gold (1988); Muller-Carmen, Croucher, Leigh (2008).

Indeed it has been said (Marchington and Wilkinson 2007) that not only is HRM now often acknowledged as the major factor differentiating between successful and non-successful organisations, more important than technology or finance in achieving competitive advantage, but that for a company to be successful, it must align its HR strategies alongside its organisational aims and objectives i.e. strategic HRM.

2.2 Strategic HRM

A strategic approach to HRM has a “pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organisation to achieve its goals” as defined by Wright & McMahan 1992. Therefore to achieve the strategic HRM goal, the role of the people management function has had to change, moving from a traditional centralised and controlling personnel management function to strategic HRM (Teo & Rodwell 2007). This has been particularly difficult in the public sector where the people management function has tended to be seen as reactive (Coggburn 2001), with the end result that the HR function is seen to contribute at operational level and not strategically which is really what HRM wants to be (Sampson 1993).

Therefore for HR to move from an operational to strategic function within the public sector, the transfer of operational HR activities to line managers is central to the HRM function having a natural transition from personnel management to strategic partnership because by its very nature it releases traditional HR practitioners from their day to day functional roles to allow them to concentrate on value adding strategic and change management roles (Caldwell 2003).

2.3 Devolved HRM

Once it had been argued and agreed by academics and practitioners alike that there was a need to move away from a top down command and control model to one that was based on high involvement and reciprocal commitment, it implied that a new kind of psychological contract based on mutual trust between an organisation and its employees was required (Rousseau 1995) and it is postulated here by the researcher that as a result there is a requirement for a more sophisticated style of HRM, moving from the traditionally “hard” quantitative and calculative HR manner employed moving to a “softer” more people focused and inclusive version of people management. Central to achieving this high employee involvement with reciprocal commitment through a successful implementation of strategic HRM is the role undertaken by Line Managers (Tsui 1987, Hermal & Morley 1995, Ulrich & Brockbank 2005).

Martins (2007) intimated that the main reason for HRM being devolved to the line was that FLMs were in the best position to adopt and deliver the most effective HRM, as they were closest to the front line staff. Equally it has been posited that for HRM to be truly strategic and aligned to organisational aims and objectives then the responsibility

for its implementation has to be devolved to Line Managers as this will enable the Personnel Managers who traditionally had a HR responsibility for employees to take on a more strategic advisory role as reported by Guest (1987) and Schuler (1992), in effect the HR function and its staff would become strategic partners to the line managers.

Furthermore the application of the adjective strategic must imply a concern with the ways in which HRM is critical to organisational effectiveness (Boxall & Purcell 2000). Even those who question the distinctiveness of HRM can accept the increased role for Line Managers (Legge, 1995), and equally there is an acknowledged acceptance that resistance on the part of Line Managers within an organisation to accepting increased HRM responsibilities will dilute, if not undermine attempts to translate HRM policy into practice (Thornhill & Saunders 1998).

The reluctance of FLMs to take on the HR role is due to a number of factors. These can include a lack of training provided to them (Priestland and Hanig 2005), and the absence of supportive surrounding management culture, systems and structures (Guest and Conway 2004). Yet, what is less well known is the potential impact of the increased HRM responsibility on Line Managers, in particular when it is unclear whether or not they are skilled to undertake the role, and how it affects their “day job”. Operational demands tend to be regarded as more important by Line Managers leading to a minimalist approach to HRM being taken (Earnshaw et al 2000 and Renwick 2000) who both stated that a FLMs primary responsibility is in meeting service or production goals not managing HR. Where there has been significant devolution, Managers have reported that HR responsibilities took up increasing amounts of their time, which detracted from “real work” (Harris et al 2002). Torrington and Hall (1996) further suggested that there has been a “taken for granted” approach about the principle with little critique of the proposition i.e. reality is very different from the theory.

There is also evidence to suggest that the HR function - Line Manager relationship within organisations has worsened as a result of this HRM devolvment i.e. the lack of access to a centralized personnel function has implied to Line Managers that they no longer had a sense of direction to guide their actions and practices for which they now had sole responsibility (Guest 1987), and as a result not all parts of the HRM practices, in particular the “hard” elements such as recruitment and discipline have been successfully adopted by Line Managers. A further criticism by Line Managers of the

strategic HR function is that it has little personal contact with Line Managers who are responsible for implementation of HR policies that the HR function have largely been responsible for designing (Harris et al 2002), therefore the policies might be fine in theory but they are hard to put into effect (Whittaker and Marchington 2003).

To emphasise the importance of good communication between an organisations HR function and its Line Managers, Griffiths (2006) states that good devolved HRM practice requires that the HR function interacts directly with the Line Managers it services and as a result Line Managers can view the HR function as “customer friendly”, something that to date is rarely observed. Furthermore, studies undertaken such as those documented by Torrington and Hall (1996), have shown that the success of Line managers taking up HR responsibility have been at best mixed with an observed reluctance to accept new responsibilities seemingly forced upon them with no consultation (Harris et al 2002).

In general terms, in such a large and diverse organisation such as LCC it may not always be possible or indeed practicable to implement a standard set of HR practices across the organisation, as this would assume that all employees are driven by the same rewards and want to engage in the mutually beneficial psychological contract that is associated with SHRM and it also assumes that all Line Managers are prepared to embrace the HR philosophy being promoted.

Further, even where line managers in LCC are willing to push the HRM agenda forward, they require specific sets of skills to implement HR policies and a common criticism from other studies is that line managers have generally received very little training in order to help them make appropriate decisions (Bond & Mc Cracken 2004). Understandably this in turn can lead to a crisis of confidence in Line Managers being able to undertake the HRM effectively and fully. Similarly, according to Armstrong (2001), FLMs tend to lose confidence in themselves when they are unclear what their HR role is and what is expected of them. As Harris et al 2002 states, managers frequently receive insufficient training to enable them to handle the legal implications of HR issues that they have to deal with and this needs addressing.

Cunningham and Hyman (1995), state that for Line Managers to achieve the aims of HRM they need a concomitant increase in their training and development in people

centred skills. This will be examined further through discussions with the LCC focus groups and Human Resources in LDL.

Equally little attention has been paid to what actually happens at the day-to-day operational level from the perspective of the Line Manager (Hall & Torrington 1996). This is echoed in studies undertaken by Budhwar, 2000; Harris et al., 2002; Hoogendoorn and Brewster 1992, where they all posit that the reality and extent of devolution to the line has been mixed.

Without a structured manner in which to devolve HR responsibilities downwards to the line, it can be argued that line managers will as a result not understand what elements of HRM they are supposed to embrace (Thornhill & Saunders 1998). Subsequently the willingness of line managers to assume increased HR responsibilities has received little attention in the appropriateness of HR devolution and it is little wonder that successful HRM implementation as a result has been mixed (Harris et al 2002). Added to this, Line Managers have often been concerned about making decisions in an area that they lacked confidence or expertise (Harris 2007), which could be again attributable to a lack of structured training being offered.

Most if not all of the issues highlighted such as variable guidance from the HR function, an inconsistency in approach by both the HR function and Line Managers, a lack of training for managers and poor communication etc. have remained exacerbated for the FLMs in an organisation such as LCC, as it is the FLMs who have the largest numbers of employees to manage operationally on a day to day basis. Therefore it can be postulated that by having to undertake the HR role as managers they will have observed a greater impact on their ability to deliver the services for which they have responsibility.

2.3.1 Devolved HRM and LCC

In LCC there has been a concerted move away from a traditional Personnel Management approach to one of Strategic HRM and its devolvment to Line Management during the past decade driven by the formation of Liverpool Direct Limited (LDL) – a joint venture between LCC and British Telecom in 2000.

This newly formed joint venture organisation undertook a radical overhaul of several major business components within LCC, one of which was HR and Payroll in 2001. It

was acknowledged by senior management within LCC that good HRM policies and their implementation was central to the short and long term success of LCC, and as such HRM was required to be firmly aligned to the strategy, aims and visions of LCC. Subsequently the manner in which LCC undertook its HR requirements had to change radically to reflect the need for HR to be aligned strategically. As a result of LCC moving towards a strategic HR function, devolvment of HRM to Managers was introduced. To ensure a consistent approach and to minimise deviation from the HR practices in LCC by line managers, the HR policies have been developed centrally by HR such that there is a level of managerial consistency to minimise the risk of litigation when HR responsibilities have been devolved. This approach is recognised as organisational best practice (Nutley 2000).

2.4 The HR role of FLMs in LCC

Employers have sought to increase the responsibilities of FLMs for a range of “soft” and “hard” HRM activities and issues (Crail 2004), and FLMs in LCC have a role in both these parts of HRM defined as follows:

Soft

Appraisal

Mentoring and Coaching

Team working

Training and Development

Hard

Absence Management

Grievance and Disciplinary matters

Recruitment

However having a set of HR policies and guidance alone is not enough. If the HR policies are structured as to apply a consistent approach being employed there should be no room for differences in HR interpretation by individual FLMs and hence there should be an avoidance of any manager/employee conflict. It is a general rule that most line managers prefer to work with the soft elements of HR as these do not carry the same legal implications as those contained within the hard element of HR where

managers often feel inadequately skilled and/or trained to handle these issues (Harris et al 2002). Line Managers are also responsible for the development needs of their staff to support the business aims and objectives. But the training and development needs of staff are always balanced by the budget constraints within which the line manager has to work.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

2.5.1 Introduction

The concepts regarding HR devolvment to FLMs detailed within the literature review in this chapter can be shown visually via a conceptual framework that is based on the McKinsey 7S model developed in the 1980's and added to further by a framework looking at the factors influencing FLMs ability to undertake the HRM role, developed by Martins (2007). In the former, the 7S model details seven interrelated elements that are described as essential to an organisation being effective (Fisher 2007). These are as follows:

- i Strategy - The plans for resource allocation in order to achieve organisational goals.
- ii Structure – The manner in which an organisations individual units relate to each other: centralized and vertically and decentralized and horizontally.
- iii Systems – The procedures, processes and routines that characterize how work is done
- iv Skills – capabilities of individuals and the business itself
- v Staff – Numbers and types of personnel within the organization
- vi Style – Cultural style of the organization and how key managers behave in achieving organizational goals
- vii Shared values – This sits at the centre of this model i.e. what the organization stands for and what its beliefs and attitudes are.

The above can be separated into two distinct clusters the first three being cold, analytical and impersonal i.e. objective, the latter four being intangible and human i.e. subjective.

In the Martins model 2007, the four key components are as follows:

- i. Perceptions and attitudes of primary stakeholders of the role.
- ii. The degree to which the FLM role is adequately defined and communicated.
- iii. The extent to which FLMs receive appropriate training and development opportunities made available.
- iv. How broader organisational systems and structures serve to facilitate or hinder FLM role/performance.

Both models share some commonality such as stating the importance of FLMs having the necessary skills to undertake the HR role and/or provision of training needs to fulfil the role; how organisational goals, systems and structures have an important influence on successful HR implementation; and that good communication between all parties is also crucial.

Therefore the researcher has taken these two models and used them as a basis for the conceptual model to be used for this dissertation as shown in figure 1.

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Fig 1. LCC Line Manager HR framework

Through the applied research both the conceptual model and its components will be examined. The semi-structured interviews will look at both sides of the framework i.e. the subjective right hand side of the model and the objective elements on the left hand side of the model.

Explanations of each of the concepts given within the framework are as follows:

2.5.2 HR Strategy & Policies

The HR strategy adopted by LCC is one with a goal of defining a set of key people initiatives to support the overall business strategy of LCC, the strategy providing a broad outline of how the initiatives will be delivered.

The HR policies for the purposes required here are the guidelines and approaches for meeting the key people initiatives outlined in the HR strategy. It is important for FLMs to have good knowledge of the company HR policies for devolved HR to be effective (Bond and Wise 2003).

Therefore the FLMs will be asked about the strategy adopted by LCC and the policies that sit behind the strategy to gauge their opinion on how they view the strategic approach taken by LCC and the policies that sit within HR.

2.5.3 HR Structure

How HR is structured is important to the FLMs to enable them to undertake their HR role effectively. Without knowledge of the structure i.e. who is in HR, what their roles are, not knowing how HR liaises with LCC etc. then managers will not know who to turn to in HR for the most appropriate advice especially on the “hard” elements of HR such as absenteeism, grievances and discipline. Therefore it is only to be expected that without knowledge of the structure within the HR function, FLMs will feel antagonistic to HR and it follows that without knowing who does what in HR, then managers will lack confidence in the HR function and its staff.

2.5.4 HR Systems

The procedures and processes i.e. the systems that sit behind the HR policies are of utmost importance. FLMs need to not only know what HR elements that they have responsibility for, but also how they are supposed to undertake them. It is vital that there is no ambiguity in policies that they have to follow, i.e. it must be clear what they

need to do in any given situation. Failure to do so may result in not only a lack of confidence in the HR policies by the FLM, but it may also lead to confusion for both the FLM and the employee in question and this in itself can cause a breakdown in the relationship between HR, FLM and employee.

2.5.5 Communication

Good communication between an HR function and for those whom HR policy impacts upon the most i.e. FLMs is critical, particularly with regards to the ongoing day-to-day relationship between HR advisors and FLMs. Having the opportunity to talk with a named person from the HR function is seen as essential (Legge 1995). Equally how the FLMs communicate with their managed staff as part of the psychological contract is equally important; good communication from line managers to staff being managed is considered to be important particularly when employees are asked about their commitment to an organisation. Employees need to feel that they are a vital part of an organisation, how it functions and an awareness of changes before they happen etc. In essence that they are made to feel part of the organisation as it moves forward. If managers do not communicate well with their staff then it is likely that staff will not participate in a psychological contract (Torrington and Hall 1996, Guest and Conway 2004), which is fundamental to an organisation developing successfully where strategic HRM has been implemented.

It has been widely reported that for HR strategy to be successfully implemented then the policy formers should engage with managers both during policy formation and whenever any part of HR policy is considered for change. Without such engagement, managers at all levels in particular operational managers such as FLMs consider that as they haven't had input into the policy formation then they are unlikely to welcome any devolvement of HR responsibility to them nor do they consider any ownership of the policies themselves, and as such successful HR implementation will be mixed at best and therefore good communication is critical to the process.

Equally the relationship between HR advisors with FLMs within a devolved HR environment has been shown to be beset with communication problems as the HR function is now acting in a more hands off strategic role unlike in the days of the traditional personnel function whereby FLMs considered that HR was a more

approachable and friendly part of the organisation and considerably more in tune with managers issues and needs.

2.5.7 Skills & Training

The skills required by those having HR responsibility should be such that they can execute their role to the necessary level required, enabling the organisation to align its strategic HR successfully to its corporate strategy.

A criticism of devolving HRM has been that Managers are allocated the HR role in its entirety, without any evidence given or sought that those managers tasked with carrying out the role are skilled to do so. Therefore more attention is needed on training up managers in the HR aspects of their jobs (Marchington and Wilkinson 2002). De Jong et al (2004) states that continual training on managers is central to effective devolved HR.

For new Managers being recruited, their suitability in possessing the necessary skills for them to undertake a people management role can be determined as part of the selection process through psychometric tests and at face to face interview. This however cannot be the case for those Managers already in the organisation for whom as a result of the change to strategic HRM for example, these Managers are given the additional people management responsibility without any suggestion that they have the necessary skills to undertake the role, regardless of how willing they may or may not be to do it.

Linked to having necessary the skill sets, for Managers with increased HR responsibilities there is a vital requirement that they have access to and can undertake when necessary training and personal development to learn new people management skills and for them to improve in areas that they consider themselves to be lacking. This is most noticeable for the hard elements of HR such as grievances and disciplinaries when FLMs have made it patently clear that they do not consider that they are equipped to undertake this part of the HR role and that they required ongoing training (Whittaker and Marchington 2003) and organisations need to understand the importance of training and development for FLMs if they are to have truly devolved HRM consistently across their organisation.

2.5.8 Staff Management

In being able to successfully implement HRM, managers require commitment from staff to get their buy in to the “soft” elements of HR. The performance management items within most HRM systems such as performance appraisals, performance related pay and training and development are not observed by employees as being important towards job satisfaction (Guest 2002). Instead there are a set of practices rarely identified within HR literature such as keeping staff informed about organisational changes and developments, family friendly practices, equal opportunities etc. It is these practices that employees value the most and as such the question could be asked – should it be these softer elements of HR that are promoted and given most attention to by both HR and Line Managers? If this happened would it be more likely that employees would contribute more towards the wider organisational aims? Managers are also required to take a lead role on the development of their staff including identifying, facilitating and initiating training (Hutchinson and Purcell 2007).

Additionally, what has been ignored during previous studies into devolved HRM but posited by the researcher is the wide variety of employees that FLMs have to manage and how the nature of the employees being managed can greatly assist or hinder the FLMs in being able to undertake their HR role.

2.6 Summary

This chapter outlines contemporary thinking on the devolvment of HRM to FLMs. It explains how the HR function has changed within LCC. It highlights the main issues that have arisen as a result of HR devolvment, and it presents a conceptual model based on existing research that has been developed to reflect both the objective and subjective concepts that influence the HR role that a Manager has to fulfil.

Therefore the next chapter discusses the research methods that will test the conceptual model in relation to the impact of devolving HR on FLMs particularly the subjective elements to the right hand side of the model that the researcher has already highlighted in Chapter 1 as having not been fully explored in research to date.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is initially concerned with identifying the best research philosophy to be adopted, as this contains important assumptions about the way in which the world is viewed by the researcher, and it is these assumptions that underpin the chosen research strategy and its associated methods (Saunders et al 2009). The chapter therefore starts with an explanation of the philosophical approach chosen by the researcher; then the chapter details the research strategy employed including methods deemed appropriate to the philosophy chosen, and this section also explains the limitations of using such methods. Subsequent sections within the chapter are dedicated to the research design and procedures, with finally a section on ethical issues that were considered by the researcher.

3.2 Research Philosophy, axiology and approach

3.2.1 Research Philosophy

The epistemological approach basis for this research project is a mix of critical realism and interpretivism. As explained by Saunders et al (2009), in practise it is rare that a particular research question falls neatly into only one philosophical domain and that is the case here.

The rationale for this dual philosophical approach is that the critical realist side to the research i.e. what is known about the associations between the concepts of the framework is fine in itself but it just states that there are connections as per the conceptual framework, but not why. To find out more about links between the variables and to allow for individuals accounts of these concepts, then only an interpretivist approach can do this. Interpretivist research can convert the pattern of causal connection. Put another way, Realism research shows a connection, interpretivism explores why there is a connection.

The orthodox realistic objectivity is based around what is known about the HR function in LCC, its strategy, formal structures and systems that Managers have to work within and what could be considered as constants.

The subjective elements of the conceptual framework i.e. staff management, communication and skills/training needs that are not as easy to measure and are not constants can only be fully understood through interpretivist means as this part of the conceptual framework assumes that reality isn't always observable and in this instance that it is very much dependant on the human relationships between HR advisors, FLMS and managed staff. Therefore despite the aforementioned objective elements associated with HR being implemented in LCC, the various interested parties can interpret the actual HR role and responsibilities that it contains, in different ways i.e. it is more subjective by nature.

3.2.2 Research Axiology

This is a branch of philosophy that studies judgements about values. (Saunders et al 2009). More importantly it is about what values the researcher has that play a part in all parts of the research as posited by Heron (2006). This is particularly relevant to the researcher as they are not only undertaking the research in their own organisation, but they are also an employee the same as those being interviewed, about whom the project is framed. Therefore the researchers own personal values have motivated the research question through having first hand experience of the impact of HR devolvment and therefore have helped shape the research question, its aims and the research methods used.

3.2.3 Research Approach

The research approach aimed at the FLMS is a mix of deductive and inductive, deductive because initially it sets out to test an existing and confirmed theory; the research is drawn from existing knowledge, utilising the conceptual model and the researchers own experiences as a manager. However because the researcher wants to do more than use traditional methods of quantitative analysis that are too prescriptive, then a more inductive approach i.e. the use of open semi structured interviews will be undertaken.

3.3 Research Strategy

The strategy used for this dissertation is a case study. A case study enables a holistic account of the subject to be obtained as described by Fisher (2007), helping the researcher to focus on intertwining relationships i.e. people, policies, structures etc.

In this particular case study a holistic account is exactly the required output of the research i.e. to understand how the interrelationships between the HR function, its strategy, structure & systems and the HR/Manager/Staff triumvirate impact on FLMs being able to undertake the HR role effectively. Because of the time constraints, and the researcher wanting to get a better understanding of the unresolved issues around devolvment of HR highlighted in Chapter 2, this can only be achieved through semi structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires.

The case study is a Single Case Holistic one (Yin 2003) and the unit of analysis is the FLMs within the Environment Business Group (EBG) of Liverpool City Council. For instance the research is not looking at comparing individual FLMs against each other within the business group being studied; rather the research is looking at the FLMs as a single entity. Equally the research is not looking to compare the FLMs within the EBG with other FLMs in other parts of LCC. Another reason for using a case study is the added value in researching the substance of the case study from more than one perspective of stakeholders i.e. in this case in addition to interviewing the FLMs, a separate one to one interview with a senior manager in the HR function of LCC and a subsequent review of the LCC approach to HR via written procedures and the use of the LCC intranet will form part of the research.

The main drawback with a single case study is that it doesn't allow comparison of responses with other research cases i.e. a multiple case study and therefore a researcher in these circumstances cannot state whether or not findings can be replicated elsewhere i.e. within other business groups of LCC; or equally that the findings are particular to the single case study being undertaken, in this case the EBG.

3.3.1 Choice of research methods

As briefly explained in 3.3, the research method chosen is a multiple method qualitative study as follows:

- Semi structured interviews with focus groups of FLMs
- A One to one interview with a senior manager in HR using a set of questions in part determined by existing knowledge, in part from FLM interview outcomes.
- A review of interviewed FLM job descriptions
- A review of LCC corporate and HR documentation regarding policies, systems and structures

Semi structured interviews offer consistency in lines of enquiry with the ability to offer opportunities for further probing of responses (Maxwell and Farquharson 2007). In addition they have earned credibility due to their widespread use in qualitative research (Flick 2002). Multiple methods are increasingly used in business and management research (Curran & Blackburn 2001) and it is therefore unusual that a mono method is employed in this type of research. This is allied to the fact that the use of multiple methods will allow triangulation of data (Yin 2003), where the data from the literature review in Chapter 2 will be compared and tested against the focus group interview data and the LCC HR manager responses that will be reviewed.

Semi structured interviews also enable the researcher to explore responses given by those being interviewed; the researcher does not want simple yes and no answers which would happen if a set of closed questions were used. This approach is further enhanced by the use of focus groups, which is ideal for this purpose (Fisher 2007). The focus groups will encourage the participants to think more about the themes discussed and it should enable them to elaborate or build on relevant points.

The one to one interview with the senior HR manager will be more structured albeit loosely; the interview will in part be based around what already exists in contemporary thinking on devolved HR, the researchers own perceptions as a manager, and what arises from the interviews with the FLMs.

Therefore the choices of research methods chosen are deemed appropriate.

3.3.2 Limitations of research methods

The main limitations on the method used are both time and sample size. The use of more than one part of LCC as an organisation or another organisation outside of LCC would have taken more time than that allocated, but equally a larger more diverse sample size would have given rise to a multiple case study which in turn would have improved validation of the outcomes, rather than being specific to one case study.

3.3.3 Rejected methods

To begin with all types of research methods as identified in both Saunders et al (2009) and Fisher (2007) were considered and apart from the chosen Case Study option, they were rejected for a variety of reasons. Experiment and Surveys as research methods were rejected, as they are more akin to scientific objective studies that a positivist/realist would use. Additionally, with the use of a Survey research method a much larger sample size would be required and the use of questionnaires would be central to it being employed, neither of which were considered appropriate i.e. the researcher didn't want those being interviewed to be aware of any detail of what they would be asked other than them knowing that the research was in relation to HR devolvment. The researcher wanted them to answer from a "gut feeling" position, which they didn't think would be possible with these approaches.

Action research was rejected simply because of its explicit focus on action, in particular promoting change, which was not the purpose of this research.

Grounded Theory was rejected because it attempts to theorise people's subjective understandings of their world, and researchers look for these themes in interviews and observations (Fisher 2007). Those proponents of Grounded Theory believe that academic understanding only arises from what the research itself tells us i.e. it is emerging theory and not based on theories chosen in advance of the research established.

The other two rejected methods Ethnography and Archival Research were deemed to be too inductive and overtly time consuming and were therefore not considered appropriate for research within a Business context.

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Construction of the instrument(s)

The open-ended questions used within the semi-structured interviews are based on the research aims, the findings from the literature review in chapter 2 and the conceptual model.

Initially, in keeping with semi structured interviews, each focus group will be asked fairly broad and generic questions about the LCC HR function, its structure, policies and systems as per the left hand side of the conceptual model, as a good understanding of these is key to managers being able to undertake the HR role effectively (Guest and Conway 2004). The use of a set of broad and generic questions will also put the respondents at ease, encouraging them to engage with the researcher (King 2004).

A second set of questions will be more focused around specific hard and soft elements of HR as posited by Storey 2001, such that responses by the FLMs can be explored (Healey and Rawlinson 1994). This will enable the right hand side of the conceptual model to be investigated. (A full list of the semi structured interview questions is detailed within appendix 2).

The interview questions for the HR Manager are more structured partly because the questions will arise from responses given by the focus groups, and equally because the researcher didn't want the interview to be a wasted opportunity i.e. that the HR Manager would not be able to answer some of the questions in part or in full if they did not have some idea of what they were being interviewed about.

A clear interview protocol is identified in 3.5.1 and appendix 2 and this details how the interview instruments have been accurately and ethically applied. This has ensured that all those interviewed have done so voluntarily and it has meant that all participants have been fully aware of the purposes of the research, and what has been expected of them.

3.4.2 Validity, reliability and triangulation

To establish the reliability and validity of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews, triangulation is used. Triangulation is valid for the type of research undertaken i.e. case studies which are very likely to need to use and triangulate multiple sources of data collected using different data collection techniques (Saunders et al

2009). Therefore the literature review has been used to theme the open ended questions for the qualitative semi structured interviews and the outcomes from these interviews will be used to frame the prescriptive questions for the HR Senior Manager. By triangulating the data collected from the research it will enable the researcher to discover whether the qualitative data collected from the focus groups is telling them what they think it is or otherwise.

3.5 Research procedures

3.5.1 Administration of research instruments

Semi structured interviews

The interview questions were considered to be more a range of themes relating to the conceptual model which itself was formed out of the literature review (Appendix 2).

The semi-structured interviews via a series of four focus groups were conducted over a two-week period between the 5th February and the 22nd February 2010. The dates on which the groups were interviewed were based on availability of FLMs and the availability of meeting rooms at their places of work. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, with meeting rooms booked for three hours to allow for delays in starting and any overruns that may occur.

Participants were chosen firstly through the contacting the four Heads of Service for the business units being studied within the Environment Business Group (Appendix 2). Each Head of Service was briefed about the research via email and were invited to discuss further with the researcher if they had any questions other than the email briefing and being asked to nominate suitable participants. For the semi structured interviews three focus groups of five participants were formed, and one FLM was interviewed separately as they were also a Head of Service with no FLMs between them and their staff i.e. they were the FLM with regards to HR. I also expressed via email prior to interview and at the start of the interviews that their participation and their answers given would be kept strictly anonymous and confidential.

Interview with Senior HR Manager

The researcher asked the Head of HR in LDL for assistance in the research via an email request (Appendix 2). I explained the aims of the research and that I would be undertaking interviews with FLMs via a series of focus groups. I requested help from HR in discussing the outcomes from the focus groups such that any potential issues could be discussed further with a senior manager in HR and their viewpoint gained. A senior manager was nominated and they were interviewed on the 12th March 2010. The senior manager was contacted prior to interview via email with a list of questions to be used.

3.5.2 Analysis of data

Participants interviewed agreed to the researcher making notes and having the interviews digitally recorded. The parts of the interviews relevant to the research question and aims were transcribed to enable an analysis of the data to be undertaken. All data transfer processing and storage was done immediately onto a non – LCC organisation computer. The data was then erased from the digital recording device. As discussed with the participants upon successful transcribing of the data, this data would then be deleted from the computer upon which it was stored.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues considered as part of a study according to Saunders et al (2009) may include consideration of the subject being studied. In this case study the subject was to look at the impact of the devolvment of HR on FLMs in LCC. Additionally the research population should not be exposed to any discomfort in their willingness to participate as previously highlighted in section 3.5.1 and 3.5.2. For this case study all participants were asked prior to the focus groups taking place if they were willing of their own volition in taking part. Also before and during the focus group interviews the participants were informed that at any time the recording could be stopped if they considered they could only given some responses in they were kept “off record”. All participants agreed that this would not be necessary as long as the interviews were kept anonymous and confidential, which the researcher assured them would be the case.

3.7 Summary

The philosophical approach to the research is given and the appropriate research methods to reflect this approach have been explained and justified. Equally the rationale for the rejection of inappropriate methods has also been explained. The research design including construction of the instruments and the validity and reliability are also described, as is the research analysis and ethical considerations when undertaking the research. Therefore in summary this chapter has laid the foundations for allowing the data to be analysed such that by employing the research methods in the interviews, findings and analysis of data collected can be presented in chapter 4.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the findings following the application of the research methods highlighted in chapter 3 and in relation to the research question and research aims described in chapters 1 and 2.

The format of this chapter will be to firstly explain the structure of the Environment Business Group and the roles of the participants within the four focus groups.

The Environment Business Group (EBG) is one of 27 business groups within LCC. Each business group sits within a portfolio that in turn has one of the three strategic aims of LCC at the core of its activities and delivery to its customers. An Assistant Executive Director heads up the EBG (An organisational chart of the Environment business group is included in Appendix 1), and within the EBG there are four business units - Public Protection, Environmental Services, Port Health and Parks & Green spaces, each with a Head of Service (HoS). For the case study an email (Appendix 2), was sent asking each HoS to nominate up to five FLMs who they considered would be willing to participate in the case study. The one anomaly here is with regards to Port Health. The HoS in Port Health does not have any FLMs between them and the operational staff. They themselves are responsible for all aspects of HR and as such the researcher interviewed them separately.

Of the 16 FLMs interviewed 11 had over ten years service in LCC and 9 of them had been FLMs for at least five years

Initially, a general question in relation to the LCC HR function was put to the participants and answers given were explored further using a sub set of open-ended questions (Appendix 3). This would enable the left hand side of the framework to be examined to understand the FLM perspective of HR as a function and its elements such as policy, structure and systems.

The researcher then wanted to examine the more intangible and subjective right hand side of the conceptual framework. This required a discussion of the individual soft and hard elements of HR that an FLM has to undertake (see section 2.4 of chapter 2).

Upon conclusion of the interviews, relevant recorded responses were transcribed, any recurring themes/responses given by the focus groups were grouped together and categorised such that if applicable they could be related back to any of the concepts that are in the conceptual framework. The analysis and subsequent findings of the semi structured interviews are contained within section 4.2.1 along with representative examples of transcribed responses for the different themes explored and how they are related back to the concepts of the framework. A full transcribing of the relevant responses is detailed in Appendix 3.

For the one to one interview with the senior manager in HR examples of responses against each question and the findings and analysis of the responses given are presented in this chapter in section 4.2.2. A full transcription of the interview is contained within Appendix 3.

An interpretation and discussion of the findings will be discussed in Chapter 5.

4.2 Findings and analysis of the research

4.2.1 Semi structured interviews

4.2.1.1 Theme: What do you know about HR as an organisation, its various elements and what is its importance to you as Managers?

This open ended and generalised question was asked in an attempt to get the FLMs to think about HR as a function and how their relationship with HR may have influenced their ability to undertake the HR role. The researcher also wanted to get an insight into what FLMs knew about HR in relation to its structure and the systems and a series of further questions were asked at appropriate points within the interview based on responses given by the participants.

The responses given were transcribed to extract any main indicators and to group together recurring answers. These were then analysed in relation to the HR concepts on the left hand side of the framework. For each HR concept relevant examples of the focus group responses are given where appropriate.

Concept 1. HR Strategy & Policies

“HR exists simply to support the corporate aims, it doesn’t support the managers as used to happen, but I suppose that what strategy is all about?”

“The HR strategy is all about getting the line managers to do all the HR work”

“Having a set of policies that are understandable that could be implemented would help”

“The strategy is simply to save money, to drive down costs”.

“We have had no input into what we have to use, they are simply force fed down the line to us whether we think they are workable or not”

From the responses given by those interviewed it was clear that the FLMs considered HR strategy and policy to be secondary in importance to actually how any HR policy was to be implemented by them as managers. Managers would welcome some input into HR policy formation; it was their opinion that as they were the end users then they considered themselves to be best placed in determining whether or not the HR policies being put forward were in reality achievable. Managers were also sceptical about the

reasons for HR being devolved; a common consensus was that it was simply to save money.

Concept 2. HR Systems

“HR systems should be about ensuring managers have the necessary guidance that’s accessible and easy to find to help them manage their staff effectively, but it doesn’t happen”

“The HR systems are the contact centre and the intranet, neither of which are much help to be honest”

“When you speak to someone in HR they just give information not necessarily the answer to the question you have asked”

“By systems do you mean how we access the information on the HR intranet and how we use it?”

With respect to the HR systems in place within the HR function as per the description given in section 2.5.5, the comments made would appear to suggest that the procedures and processes that sit behind the HR policies are not clear, one could even say ambiguous. FLMs said that they needed to not only know what the elements of HR were that they had responsibility for, but also how they are supposed to undertake them. It is vital that there is no ambiguity in policies that they have to follow, i.e. it must be clear what they need to do in any given situation. A lack of clarity resulted in not only a lack of confidence in the HR policies by the FLMs but it also lead to confusion for the FLMs.

Concept 3. HR Structure

“HR is there to offer advice and support, or that’s what it should be doing, but how that is possible when you are dealing with a faceless organisation with people you don’t know and have never met?”

“What structure? I haven’t a clue how HR organises themselves and I don’t suppose anyone else does either”

“Do you mean the contact centre? What else is there?”

“Why can’t we split them in three to reflect the corporate aims?”

“We have no idea of numbers of staff, no structure knowledge, no idea of levels of expertise, who does what”

The FLMs were unequivocal in their opinion in that they were unsure of how the HR function operated. Equally they were not confident that the person they were dealing with was in fact the right person and/or qualified to deal with the enquiry at the time of asking. They didn't know how many people worked within the HR function, or what roles people had, which on both counts the FLMs said would help them to understand how the HR worked and in turn how they as managers were supposed to work with the advisors in HR. FLMs also perceived the front office of the HR function to be no different to a modern day call centre with people reading from a script, not being able to deviate from what was written in front of them, again inferring that these HR staff were not qualified in HR matters and this led to a lack of confidence on their part that HR did not know what they were doing.

Another response was about how the HR function itself and its accountability. How did the HR function liaise with what is in effect their client i.e. LCC? When this question was explored further no one being interviewed seemed to know about liaison or accountability, they presumed that the two organisations met, but didn't know at what level, what the frequency of meeting was and most importantly didn't know what was discussed. When asked by the researcher why they considered this important, the FLMs said that this was central to their understanding of how well HR policy was being implemented and where improvements could and should be made. In effect the FLMs thought that without this forum and its detail then they were being ignored.

Leading on from this I asked respondents what they thought would improve HR and some of the responses are as follows:

“Be more accessible”

“Give us more clarity in what we are expected to do”

“Talk to us when we need you to”

“Let us know what we are doing well and not so well”

“Give me better support”

“At the root of everything we do, whether it is our staff, HR or our customer is communication. If that was better then I would be a lot happier”

What this appears to show is that underlying the managers concerns about HR is a frustration due to their lack of knowledge of HR not only in terms of HR theory and how to apply it, but also who the HR function are and how they operate.

4.2.1.2 Theme: There are soft and hard elements to the HR role, can you tell me what they are, and if you can how do you find them as managers?

The FLMs were asked the above such that any answers given could be explored to ascertain if the FLMs were comfortable with just some or all elements that they had identified and the researcher attempted to relate this back to previous findings in the literature review within chapter 2.

Generally speaking most if not all of the managers knew about the different elements of the HR role when asked the above question. To explore further the responses given, the researcher asked a further set of questions (Appendix 2) about the “hard” and ‘soft’ elements that they themselves had offered up including managing sickness, grievances, absenteeism, staff development, coaching, mentoring, and training.

The only HR element not offered up freely by any of the managers was with regards to recruitment. Therefore the researcher decided to ask them directly what they thought about recruitment and their role within this HR element and the following represents what they said.

“I don’t have to do it that often, the guidelines are pretty straight forward”

“One of the easier bits of HR, just follow the procedures”

“You get good support from HR on this, right from the beginning”

“I wish other parts of HR were as easy to follow and implement”

In the main respondents were fairly indifferent about recruitment, it was not considered to be a big issue, it is “*just time consuming*” would appear to be the only real criticism.

For the HR elements identified as being difficult, examples of the responses were as follows:

Sickness/Absenteeism

‘The policy on sickness is ok but it doesn’t deal with those not wanting to play ball – how do we address that?’

“If you try to enforce measures for persistent absenteeism – such as docking pay, then HR won’t let you do it”.

On this last point other comments included –

“HR told me to give them 7 days before stopping pay – but that’s not in the rules”

“HR say - Tell them that their pay could be stopped – this is useless it just undermines everything we are trying to do it’s either stopped or it isn’t”

Other responses regarding sickness and absenteeism included:

“I just lack clear support and direction from HR on sickness issues”

“HR said I couldn’t stop pay, they then asked me who told me that I could? – “You need to speak with an employee relations officer first” – totally confusing as I thought we had the powers to do that”

“I am not trained to do this”

“Welfare visits – don’t get me started it just adds to the problem”

“If HR stuck to what the guidelines said it would be a start”

In summary managers were confused about the Sickness and Absenteeism guidelines, they considered that the guidelines lacked clarity and that the advice given by HR was at best mixed. They didn’t feel sufficiently trained to deal with all sickness issues and they generally lacked confidence in making decisions especially where they considered that they would potentially be criticised both by HR and the employee in question. A lack of support and direction from HR was also a repeated concern.

Grievance/Disciplinary

“We really need HR at all stages”

“I have never had training with regards to grievances or disciplinaries”

“It’s difficult to get good consistent help”

“It would be far more quickly resolved for all concerned including the employee if HR were more involved”

“I don’t do them that often so refresher training would be good, in fact it should be a condition of chairing a grievance”

“Support through better communication with HR would help – I mean that I don’t want them to do it for me I just want to make sure I am doing it right”

This element of HR is a highly emotive topic and it caused more discussion with each of the focus groups than any other HR aspect discussed. Even those managers that were comfortable with dealing with grievances thought that HR involvement would improve the process, give consistent outcomes and prevent the procedure dragging on. Again a lack of confidence in HR, support and training were underlying themes. Equally respondents thought that due to the infrequency of have to conduct disciplinaries, refresher training would be useful or that it should even be mandatory prior to disciplining an employee.

Once the respondents had given their thoughts on the HR tasks they thought to be easier the researcher explored each of the tasks identified as follows.

Staff Development

“I enjoy developing my staff; it helps them and also helps me to do my job”

“I see it as part of the job as it can only help deliver a better service”

“I can’t stress enough how important it is”

“You need to invest in individuals if you want to stay ahead of the game”

“Developing staff can be rewarding”

“It’s important to me and to them”

“It’s a two way process but it’s up to us to drive the process”

Clearly it can be seen that managers embrace the idea of developing their own staff, indeed they understand the importance of it in relation to improving service delivery and the only criticisms/difficulties were those from earlier with regards to development including – time restraints, training & budget restrictions and a lack of buy in from some members of staff.

Mentoring and Coaching

This was only mentioned by a couple of managers but once it was highlighted the researcher asked what they thought it meant, as a result other managers engaged in debate about the subject.

Comments included:

“If you have the right mix you can put someone new with an experienced person who will be a good influence”

“In some ways it is better than formal training as it is more hands on and relevant to the job”

“I see this as an important part of the job because if you encourage the right people then you will get more from them and foster a good relationship which can only help”

“I think my staff genuinely know that I want them to improve and by doing this it can only help matters”

It was noticeable that there was more engagement apparent in younger managers who appeared to understand the importance of informal coaching and mentoring to get the best out of staff.

Training

The researcher firstly asked if the managers meant that this was related to training for their staff and they generally agreed that it was although some said that training also applied to them but the researcher pointed out this had already been covered when talking about difficulties in undertaking the “hard” elements of the HR role.

Responses given included:

“Training has to be appropriate, not just for personal development of the individual, in these cases it works well”

“I suppose training is about the formal part of developing staff”

“Again like all these HR issues, training needs willing staff, mine just aren’t interested as they see it as a way of getting them to take on more responsibility for no more money”

One topic around employee development and training that got managers debating in earnest was the Personal Review and Development (PRD) process. Many thought it was

this process that underpinned or in the very least should underpin the development of staff but managers were less than complimentary about it as follows:

“The PRD system is the problem more than anything else; it’s just a paper exercise”

“PRD is too time consuming, it’s just a game, no one is really taking it seriously”

“Why discuss with an employee through the PRD process what they want to do to improve themselves when they and we both know that the chances are it isn’t going to happen”

“The PRD process is typical of HR it’s too rigid and a one size fits all approach”

“I agree, how does the PRD process and its individual parts apply to all types of employees, skilled and non-skilled etc.?”

Managers thought that the whole PRD process had been simply forced upon them in its entirety whether or not it was wholly applicable to all parts of the Council and again managers thought it would be improved if they could have a say in what was contained within the PRD policy.

The researcher then related the responses contained within 4.2.1.1 and 4.2.1.2 back to the three subjective concepts contained within the right hand side of the conceptual framework as follows:

Concept 4. Communication

It is clear that good communication plays a main role in order for managers to get the best from their staff and to be able to get staff to “buy” into the HR process. Good communication between managers and the HR function is also vitally important for managers to undertake their HRM role effectively. Good communication between the manager and staff on HR matters is essential for the understanding of staff in what is expected of them and how they contribute to the delivery of their service. However this is only possible if managers have confidence and understanding in the HR policy, structure and systems that they have to use to be effective in their HR role.

Concept 5. Training/Skills

For managers to undertake the HR role effectively and to get the best out for their staff they understood the need for training for themselves and for their staff. It was a recurring theme particularly when discussing HR policies and systems that the managers thought that they were inadequately equipped to undertake this part of the HR role. Respondents also embraced the idea that if you want productive staff and if you want to get staff to consider themselves important to the success of the business in which they operated, training was key as this would in turn develop the staff and potentially keep them in the organisation. Equally the idea of informal as well as formal training being similarly important was posited.

Concept 6. Staff Management

The responses given highlighted the difficulties managers faced with successfully undertaking the HR role as a direct result of the type of staff that they managed. It was clear that buy in from staff with regards to appraisals, training, mentoring and coaching was greatly dependent on individual attitudes of staff in wanting to engage in the process and there was a general acceptance that there was a great deal of variation in staff across the respective business units. The type of staff being managed also greatly influenced the harder elements of HR that managers had responsibility for. Issues with managing sickness and absenteeism and grievances/disciplinaries were very much down to whether staff were either technical and professional or non technical and /or non professional. Equally as explained by managers, employees with longer service were much more problematic to deal with in all respects of HRM.

4.2.2 Interview with HR Manager

The HR manager interviewed had 34 years service with LCC, of which 26 years had been in various personnel/HR roles. Five open-ended questions were used to form the basis of the interview. These questions came from the findings of the focus groups identified and detailed within chapter 4.2.1. Responses given for each of the questions were explored further when appropriate and relevant responses are given in this section.

The five questions used to frame the interview were:

- i. What is the HR structure in LDL?
- ii. How does the HR model work/operate?
- iii. Does HR know if any of their policies are successfully implemented?
- iv. How does HR liaise with LCC, at what level and how often?
- v. How is HR policy reviewed and if required how are changes made?

i. HR structure of LDL

“The HR function within LCC was centralised in 2000. Prior to this, individual HR officers were assigned to different directorates of the LCC organisation. The rationale for the centralisation of the HR function was due to a lack of consistency of an approach to employee relations across LCC, a requirement for culture change being driven by the executive board of LCC and to reduce costs within HR - at the time the HR function was seen to be high cost and low value”

The HR manager further explained that the HR function was centralised the staff numbers were reduced from 200 to 102 i.e. a significant downsizing which in itself resulted in significant cost savings to LCC. As of 2009 the HR function has been reduced further to 89 staff and this has been achieved through improved work practices leading to more efficient and effective working. There are five business units within the HR function of LDL – an organisational chart is shown in appendix 1. The HR manager interviewed manages the quality and projects business unit – its remit is the internal auditing of the other HR business units with accountability for the HR function of LDL meeting contractual service level agreements with its client - LCC. The manager also has responsibility for the contact centre i.e. the front office HR advisors who are the first point of contact for any enquiries by managers and staff. The business units with responsibilities and staff numbers are shown in table 1:

Business Unit	Responsibilities	Number of staff
Employee Relations	Welfare, conduct and sickness issues	10
Resourcing	Internal & external recruitment	10
Payroll & Pensions	Monthly payments to staff and pensioners (22,000 in total)	40
Business support	Oracle –Human Resource management database	10
Quality & Projects	Internal auditing of the HR business units and for ensuring service level agreements are met	12

Table 1: HR business units, responsibilities and staff numbers

The business units in table 1 are known as the back office teams .In addition, there is also a contact centre that resides alongside the Quality and Projects team. The contact centre has 7 front line HR advisors and they are the first point of contact for both managers and employees who have HR enquiries

When asked by the researcher, the HR manager confirmed that all employees within the HR function (including the front line contact centre) are qualified and experienced HR advisors.

ii. How does the HR model work/operate?

The HR manager stated that the HR model is based on managers accessing information themselves i.e. self-service via the HR intranet and the oracle HR database. The model operates on a single point of access via the contact centre. The model does not allow for back office staff to be contacted directly, which is critical to the success of the model employed. Indeed the HR manager said:

“There is only one version of the truth and as such there should be consistency in approach regardless of who is spoken to in the front office contact centre”.

The HR manager also stated that:

“Technically speaking different advice shouldn’t happen”

At this point the researcher pointed out that in the experience of the FLMs interviewed, consistent advice was not “the norm” and that often inconsistent advice was the cause of their frustration when dealing with HR. The HR manager stated that the only time that enquiries will be directed to back office staff will be on specific issues, most of these being employee relation issues. To underline the effectiveness of the HR model the HR manager said that currently 85% of calls to the contact centre are resolved without the need to refer to the back office.

In response to the FLMs from the focus groups asking for named HR advisors to be allocated to clustered business units i.e. the four business units within the EBG for instance, the HR manager replied:

“It’s just not possible. There are only 7 front line advisors across all of the business units and the majority of calls are from services for children, adults and families and therefore under the system that the managers would want to see introduced, the person(s) allocated to these services would be swamped with calls compared to other HR advisors and it isn’t feasible”

The researcher wanted to explore this point more, explaining that by having named HR advisors allocated to each business group then the FLMs thought that this would improve their relationship with HR and improve their confidence in the HR function.

In response the HR manager said he understood the concerns but also gave an insight into how HR had in the past tried to improve the relationship with managers as follows:

“It was discussed and agreed with LCC at executive board level that Employee relation officers would be located out in the field within different portfolios for two days a week. We monitored this after 6 months of being introduced and during that time there was very little contact made with the HR advisors in question.”

When asked by the researcher, the HR manager couldn't explain why very little contact had been made by managers with the HR advisors other than it may have been as a result of poor communication within LCC in that the agreement made had not been filtered down managers at lower levels. Further, the HR manager said that HR have in the past and would continue in the future be willing to come into management meetings and offer employee relations advice/training on issues such as grievances if required.

The researcher then asked about the aspects of HR that FLMs found more difficult to manage such as grievances and disciplinaries and explained that FLMs would like to see an employee relations advisor involved from the start of the process for these elements. In response the HR manager commented that advisors are involved at the first stage of disciplinary proceedings, but with regards to grievances:

“The reason HR doesn't do first stage grievances is that LCC don't require LDL to do so within the contract, LCC want managers to manage”.

i.i.i. Does HR know if any of their policies have been successfully implemented?

The researcher explained that this question was really about the policies that HR knew worked well and those policies that didn't? In response the HR manager explained that as an example there were 27 different indicators on employee relation issues to be met each month by the HR function regarding LCC performance on HR, and that feedback from the business teams within LCC on HR issues were given to HR, such as the number of grievances/disciplinaries and levels of absenteeism per month. The researcher asked wouldn't it be useful if there were month on month or year on year trends showing if things were getting better or worse. The HR manager agreed that this should be in place and that -

“Moving forward, year on year trends will be looked at and it should be on every management team agenda”

iv. How does HR liaise with LCC, at what level and how often?

The HR manager said that the HR Management team met every two weeks to discuss people issues such as welfare, conduct and absenteeism. In addition a senior member of the employee relations back office meets with the portfolio management teams to talk about Employee Relation issues. There is also a monthly quality service report issued on contractual and non-contractual points and these are shared with the client officer for LCC who is the workforce strategy manager.

At this point the researcher explained to the HR manager that he was wholly unaware of the existence of this client officer and therefore it was likely that this would be a similar response from other managers and that this in itself wouldn't endear HR to the managers as this would be viewed as another example of keeping managers ill-informed. The HR manager accepted that this detail was not given anywhere within the HR intranet nor was any information about the structure of HR made available for managers. Accordingly the researcher said that this just reinforces the managers' views that HR was a faceless and secretive organisation as made clear by the FLMs when talking about the HR function in 4.2.1.

During this part of the interview the HR manager made several comments that reinforced earlier views made by FLM's on communication such as:

"Managers at all levels should be aware of how we liaise"

"Better ways of communicating performance and change are required, I accept that"

"One of my bugbears is communication"

v. How is HR policy reviewed and if required how are changes made?

"Any policy development is shared with the client"

From this opening remark in response to the question, the HR manager went on to explain that there was a client/strategic function in LCC that liaised with LDL on HR policy, but according to the HR manager:

“ This isn’t meant as a criticism but people in this team are non HR people, all the HR people are in LDL therefore it creates a problem due to the imbalance between the policy creators and strategists being in LCC and the HR knowledge being in LDL”

The HR manager also shared with researcher that when HR policy is being reviewed, there is a representative from each portfolio that attends a meeting with the LCC HR strategic team, where the representatives would be informed of any proposed changes, which the representatives would then take back to the portfolios for discussion.

Again the researcher said that this arrangement was not known by him and probably not by other managers at a similar level, and in effect HR were doing themselves a disservice by this arrangement not being known i.e. managers would just assume HR acting unilaterally. The HR manager accepted this point but said:

“Don’t forget HR policy belongs to the Council not the LDL HR function, so when there are any criticisms made with regards to existing policy or changes to policy, it isn’t HR who is to blame”

Similarly the HR manager made a point that the HR intranet is also the property of LCC and that LCC decide what the content of the intranet will be, it doesn’t belong to HR.

Once the five questions had been explored, the researcher wanted to touch on a couple of points that arose from the interviews with the focus groups, the first one being training. The researcher wanted to know if the HR manager agreed that for the less frequent HR elements that had to be dealt with e.g. grievances and disciplinaries, would it be a good idea as suggested by the FLMs that refresher training would be appropriate for managers that hadn’t been involved with such a process for some time. The HR manager agreed and said that this needed to be discussed with the workforce strategy manager in LCC in the first instance.

The second point was with regards to the importance of good communication as this had been a recurrent theme both in the literature review and with the FLMs. The HR manager was asked what he thought about the way HR was communicated to FLMs and he agreed it needed improving stating:

“I know how HR information that gets shared with the client should be filtered down to all levels of managers, whether or not that happens, I’m not so sure”

“There is an invisible network operating around HR matters – we are doing a lot of good things but I suppose it isn’t communicated well enough”

Other comments made by the HR manager with regards to HR being implemented by managers were as follows:

“HR is not given enough importance by managers”

“HR should be drilled into management meetings”

“Managers require people skills and some managers will never be able to manage staff no matter how much training they receive”

“To be honest when we recruit into managerial positions at all levels, we should use psychometric testing to see what people skills they have, but we don’t do it”

4.3 Summary

The findings arising from the applied research undertaken through the semi structured interview with the focus groups are summarised in relation to what the managers think about their HR role in terms of the LCC HR function itself, the systems that have to be used, the parts of the role that the manager considers to be easy or difficult and this is linked back to the conceptual model in relation to devolved HR impacts on line managers. The findings arising from the applied research undertaken through the one to one interview with the senior HR manager are summarised in relation to the concerns raised by the FLMs through the questions that were posed.

Chapter 5 takes these findings and relates them back to the aims of the research undertaken as shown in Chapter 1 such that conclusions can be drawn.

5. Analysis & Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings from chapter 4 are discussed and conclusions made where appropriate. Firstly a critical evaluation of the research methodology as described in chapter 3 is undertaken. The next section reviews the research aims as shown in chapter 1 and evaluates the findings in the context of the literature review in chapter 2. The same approach is applied to the research question and conclusions are drawn relative to this and the findings from chapter 4. Following on, the overall conclusions from the study are given, a further section of the chapter then deals with the limitations of the research and its findings, and lastly any opportunities for further research are highlighted, which may further explain the impacts that undertaking the HR role has on line managers.

5.2 Critical evaluation of adopted methodology

The research strategy chosen was a case study to enable a holistic account of the subject to be obtained as described by Fisher (2007), helping the researcher to focus on intertwining relationships i.e. people, policies, structures etc. In this case study this was exactly the purpose of the research i.e. to understand how the intertwining relationships described in the conceptual model impact on FLMs being able to undertake their HR role. The research methods chosen were predominantly qualitative; semi structured interviews with FLMs, analysis of job descriptions and analysis of HR documents in LCC, and a more prescriptive but still a qualitative approach for the one to one interview with the HR manager.

With regards to the research question of understanding the impact of devolved HR on the FLMs, the use of semi-structured interviews was largely successful i.e. the aims of the research methodology was to get the participants to engage both as individuals and as groups such that responses given could be probed in more detail thus obtaining a deeper understanding by the researcher of the issues that the managers faced regarding the HR role. The use of open-ended questions also enabled the participants to discuss their role as managers in an open manner. It encouraged participants to engage in lively debate on the various issues that were raised. The very fact that there was no mention

during the interviews by the researcher of the concepts shown in the conceptual model meant that because the responses could be interpreted and referenced back to the model, this improved the justification for the model as proposed by the researcher.

Whilst the use of semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate research method to use, the case study would have been strengthened by similar interviews with staff within the teams that the FLMs manage. This would have confirmed whether or not staff agreed with the responses given by the FLMs on the various themes discussed during the semi structured interviews undertaken.

5.3 Conclusions on the research aims

The research aims as shown in chapter 1 were as follows:

- i. To understand contemporary thinking on devolvment of HRM to Line Managers
- ii. To obtain an insight into First line managers perceptions of HR within LCC
- iii. To gain an understanding of what the barriers are that prevent the successful HRM devolvment to First Line Managers in the Environment Business Group of LCC
- iv. To get an understanding of the HR function within LCC from the perspective of a senior HR manager
- v. To make conclusions on what the impact of devolved HR has on FLM's in LCC

Therefore this section summarises the findings from chapter 4 and /or prior research examined in chapter 2.

5.3.1 Contemporary thinking on devolvment of HRM to Line Managers

A review of contemporary literature on devolved HRM in chapter 2 (section 2.3) highlighted a number of key points.

There has been a consensus across HR that there is a need to move away from the controlling personnel environment to a more people centred human resource model for employee relations. Strategic HRM requires the HRM function's transition from personnel management to one of strategic partnership to release HR practitioners from the HR day-to-day role. Therefore the HR implementation role has to be taken up by the line manager who is central to HRM being strategic (Heraly and Morley 1995, Tsui 1987, Ulrich and Brockbank 2005).

Research has also posited that FLMs tend to have many other priorities other than managing and developing people working for them (Whittaker and Marchington 2003, Mc Govern et al 1997) and as such managers are reluctant to take on the HR role with any purpose. There is also a sense by managers that in a devolved HR environment the strategic HR function are not approachable with little opportunity for managers to have face-to-face relationships. This in turn has resulted in loss of trust in HR staff by managers, therefore delivering less commitment (Truss 2001).

Contemporary thinking on devolved HR also emphasises the importance of good communication and consultation between the HR function and Line Managers of an organisation when HR has been devolved. The relationship between HR and the line managers will only succeed if communication is good between both parties (Kulik and Perry 2008). The HR role take by line managers has been mixed at best (Suff 2006, and Harris 2007). Another aspect identified through the literature review was that of skills and training. If managers are to be effective in their HR role they need to have appropriate training and a development strategy in place (Santos and Stewart 2003). But studies have shown that the devolution of HRM responsibilities have left FLMs under prepared, under supported and under trained (Hutchinson and Purcell 2003). Managers receive very little training in order for them to make appropriate decisions (Bond and McCracken 2004).

Line Managers have often been concerned about making decisions in an area that they lacked confidence or expertise (Harris 2007), which could be attributable to a lack of structured training being offered, not understanding what the HR function was about and poor communication between HR and managers on all aspects of HR including a lack of knowledge about its structure and systems.

5.3.2 First Line Manager perceptions of HR within LCC

The questions posed to the FLMs in section 4.2.1 were such that they could give the researcher an understanding of their perception of the HR function within LCC. It was used to address the left hand side of the conceptual model. The FLMs responses showed that there were many issues that they had with HR as a function whether it be the policies themselves, the systems that HR used to assist the FLMs in their HR role or the HR structure itself. FLMs considered that they had been given the HR role without any due thought to if they could do the job i.e. HR responsibilities had been “dumped” upon

them (Harris 2005). It was their opinion that there was an assumption from HR that the policies could be implemented across all parts of the Council and that a one size fits all approach was appropriate.

The FLMs were not so much concerned about the HR policies themselves but more about how they would implement them. They wanted some form of input into policy formation or changes and they didn't understand how this was currently done. They said that it would appear that LDL made policy changes almost unilaterally. The FLMs didn't have faith in the HR systems such as the contact centre, the intranet or the guidelines themselves. Equally they were wholly unaware of the structure of HR and what their relationship with them was supposed to be, this was explained by the fact that FLMs viewed HR being a faceless organisation with no named persons that they could deal with.

5.3.3 The barriers to successful devolvment of HRM to First Line Managers in the Environment Business Group of LCC

To answer this research aim, in conjunction to the responses given in section 5.3.2 regarding the barriers caused by the HR function and policies themselves, the FLMs were asked about the different elements of HR that they had to manage (section 4.2.2). The questions were framed such that FLMs could split their responses into what elements they thought to be difficult or easy. It was clear from the responses given that the more difficult part of the HR role was on the "hard" elements of HR namely managing sickness, absenteeism and grievances/disciplinaries (Renwick 2002).

Managers considered that these elements required specific skill sets that they didn't necessarily have and that HR needed to be more involved in these issues. The managers considered these issues to be time consuming and fraught with difficulties. They were concerned that they hadn't been given consistent advice by HR advisors, and on many occasions they were given advice that was against the guidelines that they were supposed to follow. This resulted in the FLMs being confused about what they were supposed to do, they had a lack of confidence in their ability to manage these issues, and they also had a lack of faith in the HR advisors that they were having to deal with. The FLMs also considered that they had not had adequate training to deal with these issues before being given the HR role, nor were they given refresher training, which as posited by Milsome 2006 is essential for managers on the "hard" HR issues – some

managers had dealt with these issues infrequently, or on occasion with respect to grievances and disciplinaries for instance never. The findings from the interviews on the importance of training supported the conclusions from the literature review that training was crucial to getting “buy in” from managers on HR issues particularly those considered to be difficult. They also didn’t consider themselves to be adequately experienced or trained adequately to undertake what they considered to be an important role. The importance of training for managers in HR to achieve business success cannot be stated enough. (Hoque 1999, Huang 2001, Kelly and Gennard 2007).

The FLMs stated that underlying all their concerns about taking on the HR role was one of a lack of communication, whether it is policy changes or the day to day dealings with HR, and recent studies suggest that good communication is critical (Maxwell and Farquharson 2007). This has resulted in the FLMs having an unequivocal lack of confidence in the HR function and this has directly affected the FLMs ability to undertake the role.

On the issue of the “soft” elements of HR, the FLMs were more comfortable in dealing with these. They understood the importance of developing their staff and the need to ensure that this was achieved via formal training and informal coaching and mentoring. The managers accepted that if they were to get their staff to perform and improve the performance of their respective businesses then staff development through training, coaching and mentoring was central to that achievement. However there were concerns with the process of how this was currently done i.e. the Personal Review and Development (PRD) process. FLMs considered that the PRD process was too rigid and didn’t allow for the wide variety of staff being managed and in conclusion they considered it not to be wholly appropriate or universal. Against these conclusions the FLMs made it clear that staff development through formal or informal means, whether it be training, coaching and mentoring or the use of the PRD process, was always a two way process and you could only develop those who wanted to be developed, and the reluctance of some employees to engage meant that FLMs considered that success in this part of the HR role to be inconsistent.

5.3.4 An understanding of the HR function within LCC from the perspective of a senior HR manager

It was not the intention of this dissertation to ask the opinion of anyone within HR what he or she thought about the FLMs ability to undertake the HRM role nor was it the intention of the interview with the HR manager to gauge their opinion on to what extent how well they thought FLMs undertook the HRM role. The purpose of the interview was firstly to understand how the HR function operated on a day to day basis in its HR advisory role to LCC, and secondly to raise any concerns that the FLMs had about having to undertake the HR role so that the HR manager could give their perspective on these concerns.

The HR manager through the responses given to the questions posed accepted that communication between the HR function and LCC needed to be improved on many different fronts both verbally and in written form. There was agreement between the researcher and the HR manager that LCC needed to work with HR to find mechanisms for communicating downwards through the management chain on HR policy change. The HR manager agreed that the current ways of communicating between HR and LLC were not adequate and this needed addressing.

To get managers to embrace the HRM role fully the HR manager stated that the importance of the HRM role of managers at all levels, but in particular at FLM level needed a higher status within LCC than it currently had if managers were to embrace the HRM role fully. There was an acknowledgement that the HR function needed to be more open and accessible and that knowledge of the HR systems and structures would help managers to understand what the HR function did and how they operated. Allocation of HR advisors to business groups as advocated by the FLMs was not possible due to the reduction in staff numbers in HR as explained in section 4.2.2. As such it is clear that HR do themselves a disservice by not being more open and transparent as there has obviously been a considerable amount of work ongoing in HR development with LCC that is not currently recognised or understood by the FLMs.

5.4 Overall conclusions

Through discussions with the HR manager it is clear that the HR model that is in use at LCC is here to stay. Equally the FLMs accept that they have a HR management role and that in itself will not change. However this is not what is concerning them. What the FLMs want to see is an improved way in which the HR role they have is undertaken and to assist this they want to see several key issues addressed that they consider impact on their ability to undertake the HR role effectively. These issues as highlighted in the findings of the research in chapter 4 and well documented in previous case studies as shown in chapter 2, and they can be summarised using three themes hereon known as the three C concepts:

- Communication
- Clarity
- Confidence

If these three C's could be discussed between HR and LCC and ways of improving them found, then it is possible that the HR role that the FLMs undertake will be improved as will the relationship between HR and the FLMs themselves. Poor communication between HR and the FLMs on a day-to-day basis, on policy formation and changes, and on knowledge about HR structures and systems undermines the efforts to have truly devolved HR to the line (Brewster and Larsen 2000). Without addressing the communication issues as highlighted throughout the findings in chapter 4 and subsequently endorsed by the HR manager interviewed, then there will be continued problems that can only hinder the aim of LCC to have a truly strategic approach to HRM, as explained by Bond and McCracken 2004 who emphasised the importance of good communication particularly on HR policy.

A lack of clarity can be summarised on two fronts. Firstly, with regards to the reallocation of HR activities to the FLMs in managing HR, and their understanding of this (McGovern et al 1998, and Becker and Huselid 2006). The FLMs are primarily employed for their technical knowledge and this is reflected in their roles and responsibilities as highlighted in their job descriptions and whilst HR remains the poor relation with regards to its' importance then the FLMs are not going to give the HR role the status it requires (Mc Conville 2006). Secondly, the lack of clarity in the guidelines that the FLMs are supposed to follow and implement will continue to result in mixed

degree of “buy in” from FLMs. It was a repeated concern throughout the research that the FLMs did not find the HR guidelines easy to follow, on occasion they found them at best vague and they did not understand how their concerns could be addressed. In effect they considered that they were being ignored even though it was they who had to implement the policies through the HR guidelines available on the LCC intranet. There was also a lack of clarity on the mechanisms of how concerns they had could be made whether that be directly to HR or via a representative within LCC.

Concerning the issue of confidence and the FLMs, it covers many of the points raised in chapter 4, whether that be about confidence in the HR model, the policies and their guidelines, the HR function itself or in their own ability to undertake the role. The communication and clarity issues already mentioned had clearly affected the FLMs confidence in themselves believing that they could undertake the role with any degree of success, particularly the “hard” elements of the HR role and it is only human nature that if those acting as implementers do not have confidence in the mechanisms such as systems and procedures to be used for implementation then this can only diminish the effectiveness of what they are trying to achieve. Taken in combination, the findings obtained from the interviews added weight to the conceptual framework (chapter 2) that had been developed from the earlier literature review, and the successful devolution of HR to FLMs is a product of the degree of strategic fit between their role and the HR strategies, policies, systems and structures.

Therefore in summary, if the three C’s could be addressed then this would go a long way to improving the relationship between HR and the FLMs, it would improve the effectiveness of the HR role that the FLMs have to undertake, and it would greatly enhance the aim of LCC to have truly Strategic Human Resource Management fully devolved to the line which in turn would improve LCC organisational performance.

5.5 Limitations of the study

The main limitations of this study as previously explained in section 3.3.2 were twofold. Firstly through the use of a single case study it is not possible to understand if the conclusions from the study are particular to the group under examination, and as such any generalisations cannot be made. Therefore the conclusions are made only with respect to the FLMS within the Environment Business Group of LCC. Secondly, time was a limitation. More time would have allowed either a wider group of FLMS to be interviewed and/or staff managed by those FLMS interviewed. This would have added a wider perspective on the views of those interviewed to be explored.

5.6 Opportunities for further research

The findings from the research as summarised through the use of the 3C concept could be explored further to understand if this is common across other organisations regardless of their size and whether they were in the public sector or not. Studies could be undertaken to examine how best the three C concept could be addressed.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended from the findings and conclusions within this dissertation that the researcher instigates a review of the existing approach to HR being undertaken by LCC in particular the implementation of the HR policies such that the 3 C concept can be discussed to look at ways that could improve the current HR model.

6.1 Implementation plan

The researcher recommends a four-stage process to addressing the issues raised in the dissertation as summarised using the 3 C concept.

1. To share the findings with the Assistant Executive Director for the Environment and Heads of Service within the Environment Business Group in LCC.
2. To have a meeting with the strategic team within LCC that has the current liaison role with HR to share the findings of the dissertation.
3. To have a meeting with the HR management team within LCC that has the current liaison role with HR to share the findings of the dissertation.
4. If agreement can be made on improvements through the meetings arranged, then a presentation to the executive management team of LCC to share the findings and put forward proposals that both the LCC strategic team and HR management team concur with.

Any timescales, resources and costs will be integral to discussions at the meetings and will be formulated prior to any presentation to the executive management team of LCC.

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Appendix 1 - Organisational Structures

- A. Environment Business Group
- B. LDL Human Resources

Appendix 2 – Research Instruments

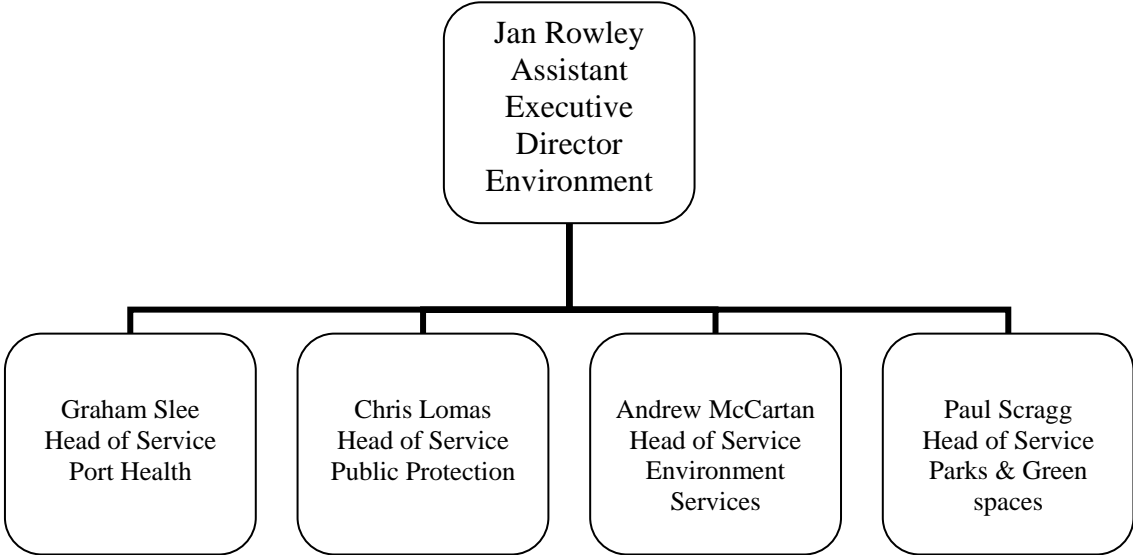
- A. Email agreement for the dissertation from AED for the Environment
- B. Email to Heads of Service from AED asking for participants
- C. Email inviting FLM's to participate
- D. Email asking HR to assist on dissertation
- E. Email inviting Human Resource Manager to participate
- F. FLM interview questions

Appendix 3 – Transcribed interviews

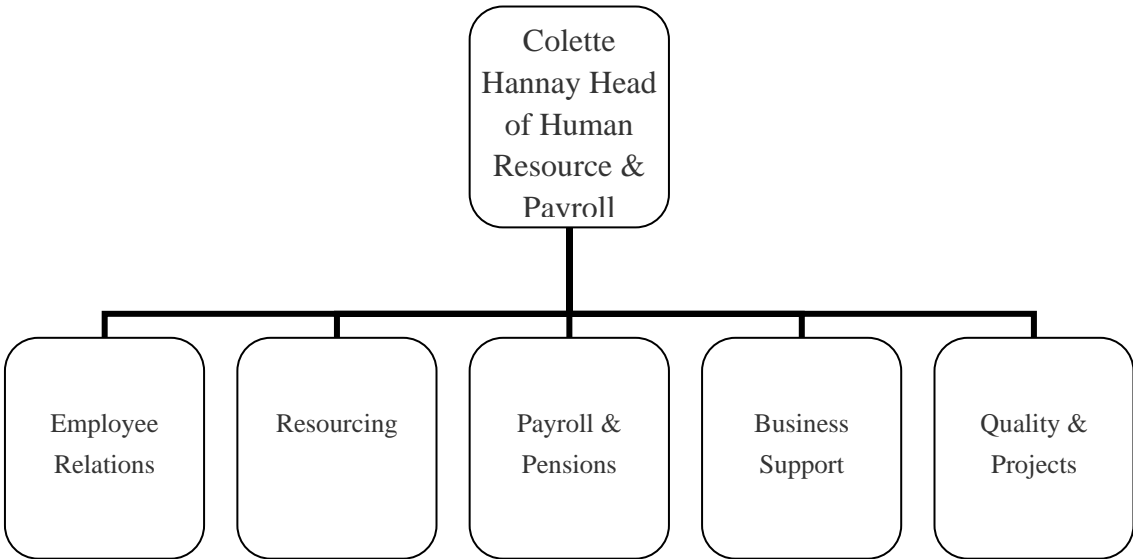
- A. Semi structured interview transcriptions
- B. One to one HR interview transcriptions

Appendix 1 - Organisational Structures

A. Environment Business Group



B. LDL Human Resources



Appendix 2 – Research Instruments

A. Email agreement for the dissertation from AED for the Environment

Happy to approve

Paul could you draft a short note for me to send to my HoBU's which summaries the work I have given approval and some timescales

Thanks

Jan Rowley
Assistant Executive Director - Environment
Liverpool City Council
Postal address:-
Municipal Buildings
2 Dale Street
Liverpool L2 2DH
Tel: 0151 233 5320
Web: www.liverpool.gov.uk

LIVERPOOL YEAR OF ENVIRONMENT 2009 - OUR CITY OUR PLANET

From: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health
Sent: 26 November 2009 09:56
To: Rowley, Jan
Subject: RE: MBA dissertation
Importance: High

Jan,

Thanks for coming back to me. Enclosed is the Research proposal plus the ethics document I am required to complete.

I will be generating primary research. The 20 officers at Team Leader level who will be interviewed in four distinct homogeneous focus groups will be approached by me asking for their participation and they will at that time be made aware of the questions that will be used and equally they will be informed that the answers given will be kept anonymous as there is no need for individuals to be identified in the dissertation I am proposing to do. I will share with them the ethics document, which will hopefully address any concerns they may have.

If you need further information and/or would like to discuss in more detail please come back to me.

Paul

From: Rowley, Jan
Sent: 25 November 2009 18:41

To: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health
Subject: RE: MBA dissertation

Paul

Before I agree which I do in principle can you let me have a copy of your proposed research and ethics document e.g. if generating some primary research will you be seeking informed consent, will and how are staff to be informed of the work you wish to do, will it be attributed or kept anonymous

Thanks Jan

From: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health
Sent: 25 November 2009 14:37
To: Rowley, Jan
Subject: MBA dissertation
Importance: High

Jan,

I sent you an email last Thursday 19th with regards to my MBA dissertation and although the research proposal has been accepted, I cannot proceed without an email from you stating your agreement to me undertaking the research on the subject, which is as follows:

“What are the barriers to the successful devolvment of Human Resource Management to First Line Managers in the Environment business group of Liverpool City Council”?

So can you please respond to this email giving your approval so I can submit it as part of the evidence required within the MBA dissertation?

Many Thanks

Paul

B. Email transcript from Jan Rowley AED to Heads of Service

Paul Farrell is undertaking his dissertation project for completion of his MBA @ Chester University and the chosen research question Paul will be using for his dissertation is as follows:

“What are the barriers to the successful devolvment of Human Resource Management to First Line Managers in the Environment Business Group of Liverpool City Council”?

The rationale behind Paul’s research question and in particular the barriers and the impact on First Line Managers (FLM’s) is that FLM’s are most likely to have the most employees directly accountable to them on a day-to-day operational basis and therefore it is likely that any devolvment of HRM will be most significant for FLM’s.

The primary research that Paul will be undertaking will require the participation of 20 Team Leaders from across the four Business units within the Environment business group i.e. 5 from each unit. Each group of 5 will be interviewed on separate dates using a focus group format that will involve the use of open-ended questions to explore the research question being asked.

The answers given by participants will be confidential as per the completed ethics from that Paul has already submitted to Chester University.

It is anticipated that Paul will undertake the focus groups at the beginning of February and as such prior to that he will put together the list of questions to be used and he will also want to meet beforehand with the participants to explain what is being done and the rationale being used.

Therefore for Paul to undertake his primary research and submit his dissertation by the deadline required the timescales are as follows:

1. Request to HoS for participant nominees – December 2009
2. Nominated participants to be forwarded by HoS to Paul Farrell – December 2009
3. Paul Farrell to meet participants individually to discuss focus groups and their format (1hr each, 20 hrs in total) - January 2010
4. Focus groups (0.5 day each, 2.5 days in total) undertaken February 2010

The notes transcribed from the focus groups will be interpreted In February/March for use in the draft dissertation report. The final dissertation has to be submitted by 3rd June 2010.

I believe this information would be helpful to us as we connect with HR. I have given Paul approval.

Thanks Jan

C. Emails inviting FLM's to participate

From: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health
Sent: 11 January 2010 11:26
To:
Cc:
Subject: MBA dissertation

Colleagues,

I have been given your names by Andy McCartan with regards to assisting me in fulfilling the requirements of my MBA dissertation. I have had accepted the following dissertation title:

“What are the barriers to the successful devolvement of Human Resource Management to First Line Managers within the Environmental Business group of Liverpool City Council”?

As such to enable me to complete the dissertation it has been agreed with Jan Rowley and the four Heads of Service that I interview managers with HR responsibilities in the four business units under Jan Rowley of which Environmental Services is one such unit.

The date for the interview needs to be no later than mid February and it will last no more than 2 hours. At this moment I am looking at Monday 8th, Tuesday 9th or Wednesday 10th at 1pm. I have provisionally booked a meeting room here at Brougham Terrace on each of those days as I have another two groups to interview.

If you would prefer I can come into Municipal Building and interview you there, as such please let me know.

The interviews will be done as focus groups with each individual business unit interviewed separately.

The interviews themselves will basically have a series of open ended questions from me to gain an understanding what you all think about having to undertake the HR role.

The answers given will be kept anonymous so you should all be able to speak openly!

I am happy to discuss with any of you prior to the interview if you so wish, so please let me know.

I know that you are all busy people and that this may seem to be a pain to be having to do it, but it has been agreed by Chester University and also Jan Rowley has endorsed what I am doing, I have to have the interviews completed by mid February so I can be on track to hand in my completed dissertation and as such I need you all to confirm one or more of the dates above as soon as possible so I can organise the other focus groups around you.

I cannot stress enough that I need these dates sticking to, and as it is 4 weeks away hopefully we can get a common date for you all.

So please don't ignore this email!!! And please come back to me as soon as you can to confirm which of the above dates you can do.

Regards

Paul

From: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health
Sent: 05 February 2010 15:20
To:
Subject: MBA Focus group
Importance: High

Colleagues just a quick email to confirm our meeting planned for this Tuesday 9th at 1300hrs In Brougham Terrace offices regarding the above. As previously explained it will take no more than two hours and the session will be based around a series of open ended questions on the following topics:

1. HR in general
2. Managing sickness/Absenteeism
3. Discipline/Grievances
4. Development/Training of staff
5. Self development with regards to HR
6. Your relationship with HR as a Manager

The discussions that we have regarding the above will be recorded and downloaded to computer so that I can transcribe them for my report. The discussions will be kept confidential and once the dissertation has been completed they will be erased.

I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday.

Regards

Paul

D. Email asking HR for assistance with the dissertation

Paul

I have asked Keith Bennett to assist you in this exercise.

Good luck with your dissertation!

Regards

Colette

Colette Hannay

Head of Human Resource and Payroll Service

Liverpool Direct Limited | Sixth Floor | Venture Place | Sir Thomas Street | Liverpool | L1 6BW

Tel No: 0151 233 3003

email: colette.hannay@liverpooldirectlimited.co.uk

web: www.liverpooldirectlimited.co.uk

P Please consider the environment before printing this e-mail. Thank you

From: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health

Sent: 18 February 2010 13:37

To: Hannay, Colette

Subject: MBA dissertation

Importance: High

Colette,

I am undertaking my dissertation to complete my MBA which needs to be by June. The topic is as follows:

“What are the barriers to the successful devolvement of Human Resource Management to First Line Managers in the Environment business group of Liverpool City Council”?

As such I have interviewed 16 First Line managers via a series of focus groups and whilst the focus groups were in the main very positive/constructive about the HR process, their relationship with HR and the HR role that they undertake as managers, there were several points that have been made that I would like to discuss with the most appropriate person in HR whether that be you or a colleague.

The points raised were as follows:

What is the HR structure in LDL?

If there is a HR structure, how does it work?

How does HR know which if any of their policies are successfully implemented?

How does HR liaise with LCC and how often?

How is HR policy reviewed and where necessary improved upon?

Would HR consider changes to any policy or how it is implemented if tangible benefits to LCC could be shown without incurring costs to LDL?

Therefore could I arrange to meet with you or if deemed more appropriate a colleague of yours to discuss the above points. It should take no more than 1 hour.

Many Thanks

Paul

E. Email inviting HR manager to participate

From: Farrell, Paul - Environmental Health

Sent: 26 February 2010 15:48

To: Bennett, Keith

Subject: MBA dissertation

Keith,

Following Colette Hannay's response saying that you would assist, could you be available for 2 hours at any time in the next two weeks please to discuss the above and the questions that have been raised at the focus groups I held?

When we meet I would like to record our conversation if that's ok, as it will be easier than keeping notes at the time. Anything said will be strictly confidential and anything included in the final dissertation would remain anonymous and only submitted for approval after agreement of the draft with all participants. Once the notes have been uploaded onto my PC and transcribed the record would be removed from my PC.

I look forward to meeting up and discussing with you.

Many Thanks

Paul

F. FLM interview questions

MBA Dissertation Focus Group prompts

1. General HR

Why do you think HR was devolved in 2001?
What was the process of devolvment of HR?
Did any of you have involvement in policy forming?
How important is the HR role to you?
How has it impacted on your ability to do the “day job”?

What do you think about the HR guidelines –?

Do you follow them to the letter?
Are they too prescriptive?
Does it depend on which part of the role?

2. Sickness & Absenteeism

How do you manage this?
What training have you received in relation?
Are the HR guidelines helpful?
Do you need to involve HR in undertaking this duty?

3. Discipline/Grievances

How do you manage this?
What training have you received in relation?
Are the HR guidelines helpful?
Do you need to involve HR in undertaking this duty?

4. Training & Development of staff

How do you manage this?
What training have you received in relation?
Are the HR guidelines helpful?

5. Your Relationship with HR

What do you know about HR and its people?
Tell me about your relationship?
Has the relationship changed since devolvment? If so why?
So what do you think about the HR function?
If you could, what changes do you think would improve HR?

6. You as an HR Manager & your staff?

Do you feel a responsibility for your staff? If yes then why?

How important do you think you are to the HR process?

What do you think makes a good people manager?

What would make you a better HR Manager?

How important is your ability to develop your staff?

Appendix 3 – Transcribed interviews

A. Semi structured interview transcriptions

1. General HR

What do you know about HR, its strategy and its policies?

“HR exists simply to support the corporate aims, it doesn’t support the managers as used to happen, but I suppose that what strategy is all about?”

“The HR strategy is all about getting the line managers to do all the HR work”

“Having a set of policies that are understandable that could be implemented would help”

“Having a strategy whatever that may be is fine but its what happens at the coal face that’s important and I don’t see how the HR strategy affects that, other than the whole HR implementation process being handed down to managers”

“The strategy is simply to save money, to drive down costs”.

“We have had no input into what we have to use, they are simply force fed down the line to us whether we think they are workable or not”

“Yes policy forming is fine but what’s the point if you have no input into them, even though you are the end user”

“Issues don’t always seem covered, and the guidance is vague”

“We should be involved in policy formation; after all we have to use it”

What do you understand about the systems used in HR?

“HR systems should be about ensuring managers have the necessary guidance that’s accessible and easy to find to help them manage their staff effectively, but it doesn’t happen”

“The HR systems are the contact centre and the intranet, neither of which are much help to be honest”

“When you speak to someone in HR they just give information not necessarily the answer to the question you have asked”

“By systems do you mean how we access the information on the HR intranet and how we use it?”

“The guidance is very prescriptive and HR don’t really offer the support that managers need”

“Mr. follow the link – it’s hardly bespoke is it?”

“Use the HR intranet is the mantra, but the HR intranet isn’t easy to use”

What is your knowledge of the HR structure and how does it affect you as a manager dealing with HR?

“HR is there to offer advice and support, or that’s what it should be doing, but how that is possible when you are dealing with a faceless organisation with people you don’t know and have never met?”

“What structure? I haven’t a clue how HR organises themselves and I don’t suppose anyone else does either”

“Do you mean the contact centre? What else is there?”

“It’s like dealing with a call centre; they don’t seem to be able to answer other than from a script”

“They are obviously reading from a script sat in front of a computer screen”

“To be fair if it is one of the more difficult issues such as sickness & absence or grievance/disciplinaries then they tend to refer it to someone who has more specialist skills”

“Why can’t we split them in three to reflect the corporate aims?”

“I don’t understand HR as being a part of the LCC organisation”

“We have no idea of numbers of staff, no structure knowledge, no idea of levels of expertise, who does what”

What will improve HR in your opinion?

“Be more accessible”

“Give us more clarity in what we are expected to do”

“Talk to us when we need you to”

“Let us know what we are doing well and not so well”

“Give me better support”

“Can we have HR seconded to us? Even if it was for a couple of days so they could see how we operate and we can see who they are”

“HR needs to become more visible, I know it can’t go back to how it was, but there must be something better than this”

“At the root of everything we do, whether it is our staff, HR or our customer is communication. If that was better then I would be a lot happier”

“We probably undervalue HR, but we don’t understand HR unlike other parts of the business such as finance and IT and that’s because we don’t have names and faces, just a faceless organisation”

2. Sickness and Absenteeism

How do you find managing this element of HR?

"If you try to enforce measures for persistent absenteeism – such as docking pay, then HR won't let you do it".

"HR told me to give them 7 days before stopping pay – but that's not in the rules"

"HR say - Tell them that their pay could be stopped – this is useless it just undermines everything we are trying to do it's either stopped or it isn't"

"Staff just think you are applying pressure and they then go off with stress - great"

"HR said I couldn't stop pay, they then asked me who told me that I could? – "You need to speak with an employee relations officer first" – totally confusing as I thought we had the powers to do that"

"I thought I would get trained to do this but I haven't had any and as a result I don't feel that I can"

"I am not trained to do this"

"Welfare visits – don't get me started it just adds to the problem"

"No room for manoeuvre"

"What's in our jurisdiction? I just don't know"

"It can create conflict – home visits in particular are difficult"

"It causes confrontation – especially home visits"

Staff can be resistant to discuss health issues with managers – sometimes we are part of the problem"

"Gender issues – what do you do?"

"The policy on sickness is ok but it doesn't deal with those not wanting to play ball – how do we address that?"

What would improve your handling of this element?

"I just lack clear support and direction from HR on sickness issues so better advice would help"

"Training would help"

"Consistency in advice"

"If HR stuck to what the guidelines said it would be a start"

3. Grievances & Discipline

How do you find managing this element of HR?

"I have never had training with regards to grievances or disciplinaries"

"Unlike other parts of HR, you start to have self doubts about if you are doing it well or not"

"It's part guidance, part experience and I haven't got the latter"

"I don't do them that often so refresher training would be good, in fact it should be a condition of chairing a grievance"

"Too accommodating for employees – its all in their favour"

"Right to appeal every time, which they do, how is that fair?"

"They can pull a grievance at the drop of a hat – they know the game too well and play it"

"Disciplining someone isn't pleasant but it's usually cut and dried"

"You are always aware that you are dealing with a persons career and so you want to get it right"

In the old days you would be accompanied by a HR person, but now it's just you against the employee and usually a trade union official and it can be intimidating"

"Although I have only dealt with one actual disciplinary it wasn't a problem, you have to distance yourself and just deal with the facts"

What would improve your handling of this element?

"We really need HR at all stages"

"If HR were more involved it would take out any doubt that I was doing it right"

"I have had training but it doesn't mean I am competent"

"I need support to know I am getting it right"

"It's difficult to get good consistent help"

"It would be far more quickly resolved for all concerned including the employee if HR were more involved"

"It should be part of our induction training and it isn't"

"Support through better communication with HR would help – I mean that I don't want them to do it for me I just want to make sure I am doing it right"

"I need to learn the ropes with support from HR"

“No training on grievances, it would definitely help”

“You are potentially dealing with a persons career and that in itself is pretty daunting”

“It doesn’t tell me in my job description that I have to do this or indeed the other HR things – why not?”

“You do the training but it’s not enough – you need scenario playing and refresher training as and when you have to be involved in a disciplinary, you may not have done one before or it might be once in a blue moon – how can that be right?”

“HR involvement would make the decision more acceptable to all concerned especially the employee”

4. Development of staff

How do you find managing this element of HR?

“I enjoy developing my staff; it helps them and also helps me to do my job”

“I see it as part of the job as it can only help deliver a better service”

“I can’t stress enough how important it is”

“You need to invest in individuals if you want to stay ahead of the game”

“Developing staff can be rewarding”

“I am always looking to bring the right people along through formal and informal development means”

“It’s important to me and to them”

“It’s a two way process but it’s up to us to drive the process”

What are the main issues with this element of HR?

“Development of staff can be difficult without the resources and funds to do it, same old problem I’m afraid”

“Developing staff is alright if you have staff who want be developed”

“Most of my staff are redeployed so they couldn’t care less if they are developed or not, they don’t want to be here”

“Staff don’t see the point in being developed whether it’s for their good or the collective good of the service”

“The difficulty in developing staff is motivating them that it is their interest to be developed”

“Typical attitude is what’s in it for me?”

“New and/or young staff are much more keen to develop, I have a problem with older, longer serving staff – it’s an attitude thing with them”

“It’s fine if you have willing staff – it’s a two way process and some just won’t play ball”

“People want to develop but they don’t see the point if they don’t have a career path”

Mentoring & Coaching

How important to you is this as managers?

“If you have the right mix you can put someone new with an experienced person who will be a good influence”

“In some ways it is better than formal training as it is more hands on and relevant to the job”

“I see this as an important part of the job because if you encourage the right people then you will get more from them and foster a good relationship which can only help”

“Some people will always know more than others and it’s a good way to improve interpersonal relationships both between me and the member of staff and them and the others in the team”

“I think my staff genuinely know that I want them to improve and by doing this it can only help matters”

Training

“Training is important, how else are staff going to improve their technical skills to do the job better?”

“I agree but training has to be appropriate, not just for personal development of the individual, in these cases it works well”

“I suppose training is about the formal part of developing staff”

“Training staff can be difficult especially when budgets are tight, how do we decide who gets preference?”

“Again like all these HR issues, training needs willing staff, mine just aren’t interested as they see it as a way of getting them to take on more responsibility for no more money”

B. One to one HR interview transcriptions

i. HR structure of LDL

“The HR function within LCC was centralised in 2000. Prior to this, individual HR officers were assigned to different directorates of the LCC organisation. The rationale for the centralisation of the HR function was due to a lack of consistency of an approach to employee relations across LCC, a requirement for culture change being driven by the executive board of LCC and to reduce costs within HR - at the time the HR function was seen to be high cost and low value”

ii. How does the HR model work/operate?

“There is only one version of the truth and as such there should be consistency in approach regardless of who is spoken to in the front office contact centre”.

“Technically speaking different advice shouldn’t happen”

“It’s just not possible. There are only 7 front line advisors across all of the business units and the majority of calls are from services for children, adults and families and therefore under the system the managers want to see introduced, the person(s) allocated to these services would be swamped with calls compared to other HR advisors and it isn’t feasible”

“It was discussed and agreed with LCC at executive board level that Employee relation officers would be located out in the field within different portfolios for two days a week. We monitored this after 6 months of being introduced and during that time there was very little contact made with the HR advisors in question.”

“The reason HR doesn’t do first stage grievances is that LCC don’t require LDL to do so within the contract, LCC want managers to manage”.

i.i.i. Does HR know if any of their policies have been successfully implemented?

“Moving forward, year on year trends will be looked at and it should be on every management team agenda”

iv. How does HR liaise with LCC, at what level and how often?

“Managers at all levels should be aware of how we liaise”

“Better ways of communicating performance and change are required, I accept that”

“One of my bugbears is communication”

v. How is HR policy reviewed and if required how are changes made?

“Any policy development is shared with the client”

“ This isn’t meant as a criticism but people in this team are non HR people, all the HR people are in LDL therefore it creates a problem due to the imbalance between the policy creators and strategists being in LCC and the HR knowledge being in LDL”

“Don’t forget HR policy belongs to the Council not the LDL HR function, so when there are any criticisms made with regards to existing policy or changes to policy, it isn’t HR who are to blame”

“I don’t know how HR information that gets shared with the client is filtered down to all levels of managers”

“There is an invisible network operating around HR matters – we are doing a lot of good things but I suppose it isn’t communicated well enough”

“HR is not given enough importance by managers”

“HR should be drilled into management meetings”

“Managers require people skills and some managers will never be able to manage staff no matter how much training they receive”

“To be honest when we recruit into managerial positions at all levels, we should use psychometric testing to see what people skills they have, but we don’t do it”